

A vetus dictum in St. Ambrose

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Notes

WHITTAKER J., *A vetus dictum in St. Ambrose* [source pythagoricienne]:
cf. N° 186.

WHITTAKER J., *A vetus dictum in St. Ambrose*: VChr XXXII 1978 216-219.
| Pour son *vetus dictum*, unus esto, Ambroise ne s'est sans doute pas inspiré
directement de Platon, Resp. 443e1 ou Epinomis 992b6, mais sa source doit
être la même que celle de Clément d'Alexandrie, Strom. iv, 23, 151, qui parle
d'une origine pythagoricienne. [186]

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A 'VETUS DICTUM' IN ST. AMBROSE

BY

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Pierre Courcelle has attempted in a recent article¹ to establish the paternity of the following previously unassigned *vetus dictum* in St. Ambrose, *Ep. ad Vercellensem Ecclesiam* 63.60, PL. 16.1204 f.: *Vetus dictum est: Assuesce unus esse; ut vita tua quamdam picturam exprimat, eandem servans semper imaginem, quam acceperit. Quomodo potest unus esse, qui nunc iracundia inflammatur, nunc indignatione gravi exaestuat, nunc vultu excandescit, nunc pallore immutatur, per momenta varius et discolor?* Courcelle goes on to assert quite rightly a close relationship between this text and Ambrose, *Ep. ad Iustum* 7.22, PL 16.911: *Et tu ergo ad similitudinem Dei unus esto atque idem: non hodie sobrius, cras ebrius: hodie pacificus, crastina die litigiosus: hodie frugi, crastina die incontiens; mutatur enim unusquisque morum varietate, et fit alter: in quo non agnoscitur, quod fuit, et incipit esse, quod non fuit, sui degener.* Then, with the aid of a wide array of supporting texts, Courcelle concludes:² “Le *vetus dictum* en question, rapporté une fois sous la forme: ‘assuesce unus esse’, l’autre fois sous la forme: ‘unus esto’, me paraît être la parole de Zénon de Cittium: ‘Vis d’une manière conséquente’.”

But in spite of the impressive battery of texts which Courcelle calls into service, his conclusion does not carry conviction for two reasons in particular. Firstly, neither *Assuesce unus esse* nor *Unus esto* is recognizably a translation or even a paraphrase of Zeno’s τὸ ὁμολογουμένως ζῆν.³ And secondly, illuminating though the material assembled by Courcelle may be,⁴ he has omitted from his account the most important item of

¹ “Ambroise de Milan dévot de la monade,” *Revue des Etudes Grecques* 87 (1974) 144 ff.

² *Op. cit.* 146 f.

³ Ambrose was indeed familiar with the Zenonian formula, which he translates thus (*De excessu fratris* I.45.1, CSEL 73.234): *Est ergo prudentis agnoscere se ipsum, et quemadmodum a sapientibus definitum est, secundum naturam vivere.*

⁴ Of particular relevance amongst the Stoic witnesses assembled by Courcelle are

evidence, namely Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* IV.23.151.1 ff.:... θεὸς δὲ ἀπαθὴς ἄθυμός τε καὶ ἀνεπιθύμητος· καὶ οὐ ταύτῃ ἄφοβος ἢ τὰ δεινὰ (οὐκ) ἐκκλίνει οὐδὲ μὴν σώφρων ἢ τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν ἄρχει· οὔτε γὰρ ἂν περιπέσοι τινὶ δεινῷ ἢ τοῦ θεοῦ φύσις οὔτε φεύγει ὁ θεὸς δειλίαν, ὥσπερ οὐδὲ ἐπιθυμήσει, ἵνα καὶ ἄρξῃ ἐπιθυμίας. μυστικῶς οὖν ἐφ' ἡμῶν καὶ τὸ Πυθαγόρειον ἐλέγετο “ἕνα γενέσθαι καὶ τὸν ἄνθρωπον δεῖν”,... εἰς δὲ τὴν ἀπάθειαν θεοῦμενος ἄνθρωπος ἀχράντως μοναδικὸς γίνεται.⁵ Like Ambrose in both the above texts, Clement deals here with the matter of the control of the emotions. If man could only escape from the mutability wrought in him by emotional disturbance, he too would become one as God is one. Thus both for Clement and for Ambrose the achievement of unity is a form of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ. We may conclude therefore on the basis of both form and content that the *vetus dictum* of Ambrose is precisely that quoted by Clement, who identifies it not as of Stoic origin but as a Πυθαγόρειον.

But the matter does not end here, for Clement's Πυθαγόρειον has a Platonic background not noted by Stählin or Früchtel *ad loc.* nor by Courcelle in his treatment of Ambrose. At *Rep.* 443 D-E Socrates recommends that the various faculties of the soul be brought into a condition of mutual agreement and the individual thereby rendered σῶφρονα καὶ ἡρμουςμένον. In this state a person may be described as ἕνα γενόμενον ἐκ πολλῶν (*Rep.* 443 E 1). The identical formula occurs in the *Epinomis*

Seneca, *Ep.* 114.26 (Nemo nostrum unum esse se cogitat); *Ep.* 120.21 f. (Homines multi tales sunt qualem hunc describit Horatius Flaccus (I *Sat.* 3.11–17), nunquam eundem, ne similem quidem sibi... Magnam rem puta unum hominem agere. Praeter sapientem autem nemo unum agit, ceteri multiformes sumus. Modo frugi tibi videbimur et graves, modo prodigi et vani; mutamus subinde personam et contrariam ei sumimus quam exuimus.); Marcus Aurelius, *Med.* XI.21.1 (ᾧ μὴ εἰς καὶ ὁ αὐτὸς ἐστὶν αἰεὶ τοῦ βίου σκοπός, οὗτος εἰς καὶ ὁ αὐτὸς δι' ὅλου τοῦ βίου εἶναι οὐ δύναται.); Epictetus, *Diss.* III.15.13 (ἕνα σε δεῖ ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, ἢ ἀγαθὸν ἢ κακόν.). But important as such texts may be as illustrations of the stress laid by popular moralists upon singlemindedness (i.e., choosing a goal in life and then adhering to it), they contain no trace of the notion of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ which appears prominently in Ambrose and, as we shall see, in Clement of Alexandria. There is no indication that Ambrose was directly influenced by any of the above Stoic texts (there are no significant verbal similarities), but he was certainly familiar with some Stoic ideas not only from his reading of Cicero in particular but also because Stoic ideals were still alive and influential in his day. On the matter of Stoic influence upon Ambrose cf. M. Pohlenz, *Die Stoa*⁴ I (Göttingen 1970) 445 ff., and G. Madec, *Saint Ambroise et la philosophie* (Paris 1974) 139 ff.

⁵ For the presumably Neopythagorean formulation μοναδικὸς γίνεσθαι cf. also *Strom.* IV.25.157.2, and H.-J. Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik* (Amsterdam 1964) 245 and 283.

992 B 6 f.: ἐκ πολλῶν ἓνα γεγονότα. Thus, Plotinus is echoing Plato *verbatim*, although this is not noted by Henry-Schwyzler *ad loc.*, when he writes (*Enn.* VI.9.3.20 ff. H.-S.): ἐπὶ τε τὴν ἐν ἑαυτῷ ἀρχὴν ἀναβεβηκέναι⁶ καὶ ἐν ἐκ πολλῶν γενέσθαι.

Platonic though the notion of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ may be, it does not appear in the above-mentioned passages of the *Republic* and *Epinomis* which have provided the terminological inspiration for Clement's Πυθαγόρειον. However, an important step in the direction of the pertinent combination of ideas is effected in Ammonius' contribution to the discussion which Plutarch puts before us in his *De E apud Delphos*. μένει δ' οὐδεὶς, says Ammonius (*De E.* 392 D-E), οὐδ' ἔστιν εἷς, ἀλλὰ γιγνόμεθα πολλοί, περὶ ἓν τι φάντασμα καὶ κοινὸν ἐκμαγεῖον ὕλης περιελαυνομένης καὶ ὀλισθανούσης. ἐπεὶ πῶς οἱ αὐτοὶ μένοντες ἑτέροις χαίρομεν νῦν, ἑτέροις πρότερον, τάναντία φιλοῦμεν ἢ μισοῦμεν καὶ θαυμάζομεν καὶ ψέγομεν, ἄλλοις δὲ χρώμεθα λόγοις ἄλλοις πάθεσιν, οὐκ εἶδος οὐ μορφήν οὐ διάνοιαν ἔτι τὴν αὐτὴν ἔχοντες; Ammonius goes on to say (*De E.* 393 B): οὐ γὰρ πολλὰ τὸ θεῖόν ἐστιν, ὥς ἡμῶν ἕκαστος ἐκ μυρίων διαφορῶν ἐν πάθεσι γιγνομένων, ἄθροισμα παντοδαπὸν καὶ πανηγυρικῶς μεμειγμένον· ἀλλ' ἐνεῖναι δεῖ τὸ ὄν, ὥσπερ ὄν τὸ ἓν. Since he is concerned to emphasize the gulf that separates man from God, Plutarch does not dwell here upon the possibility of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ but rather upon the contrast between the unity of God on the one hand and the mutability produced in man by his shifting emotions on the other. I have drawn attention elsewhere to a number of Neopythagorean features in Ammonius' discourse.⁷

We may conclude that since Ambrose, like Clement of Alexandria, makes man's search for unity a form of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ it is not probable that he was inspired directly or solely by the above-mentioned sections of the *Republic* and *Epinomis*. On the other hand, there is, as we have seen, no reason to doubt that his *vetus dictum* is any other than the precise Πυθαγόρειον quoted by Clement, who presumably had it from some now lost Neopythagorean source. Whether directly or more probably indirectly, Ambrose's *dictum* is likely to have come to him from the same source. There is no need to suppose that Clement was the intermediary, but Ambrose's immediate source, whatever it may have been, would have made him aware that the *sententia* in question was either simply a *vetus*

⁶ Cf. Porphyry, *Ad Marcellam* 10, p. 16.16 f. Pötscher: εἰς σεαυτὴν ἀναβαίνειν.

⁷ In my "Ammonius on the Delphic E," *Classical Quarterly* N.S. 19 (1969) 185 ff.

dictum (i.e., anonymous as far as Ambrose was concerned) or specifically Pythagorean.⁸

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A NOTE ON NAG HAMMADI II, 5

"As for these great signs, it was in Egypt alone that they were manifested, not in other lands, as he (it) indicates that it is to the garden of God that it is likened" (trans. G. M. Browne).

This is an allusion to the Biblical text at Genesis 13, 10: Πᾶσα ἦν ποτιζομένη ... ὡς ὁ παράδεισος τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ὡς ἡ γῆ Αἰγύπτου.

The exact phrase ὁ παράδεισος τοῦ θεοῦ occurs in both texts. The undefined subject is evidently "The Bible" or "the writer of the Bible". It should be noted that in this section of OnOrgWld the author frequently quotes or alludes to passages in the Old Testament. Thus, some six lines earlier (122.27–28) he fashioned a play on Psalms 22, 7 (or Job 25, 6) and followed that with a quotation of Psalms 91, 13.*

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⁸ For many other Pythagorean references in St. Ambrose cf. Madec, *op. cit.* 106 ff.

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